

THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC CULTURE AND COGNITION ON U.S. OUTCOMES

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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“The United States’ national government does not perform as well as it should.”

The outcomes that result from many national security policy decisions have been less than stellar. With each poor outcome the United States begins to realize an erosion of its national powers. At the conclusion of the analysis we will determine that the strategic leader’s decision making and U.S. outcomes are impacted by strategic culture and cognition. In each U.S. policy decision analyzed, we will illustrate that the optimal outcome was not achieved. To help future leaders gain awareness we have developed an illustrative term for the combined impact of strategic culture and cognition on the decision making process entitled the “drowning effect”. The drowning effect is the unintentional pushing of new concepts, approaches, acknowledgement of risk, and processes below the surface or casting them out to sea by national security professionals due to their cultural and cognitive biases.

THE IMPACT OF STRATEGIC CULTURE AND COGNITION ON U.S. OUTCOMES

“The United States’ national government does not perform as well as it should.”¹

The outcomes that result from many national security policy decisions have been less than stellar. With each poor outcome the United States begins to realize an erosion of its national powers. Outcome is defined as “an end result; a consequence”² This paper attempts to analyze the impact of strategic culture and cognition on the national security decision making process. More importantly, this paper will explore how poor policy decisions have lead to an overall decline of United States’ military and economic powers. To help frame the issues we will examine a variety of U.S. policy decisions and their impacts on U.S. economic and defense capabilities. Key questions include:

- Do cultural theories provide useful explanations of national policy decisions?
- What is the National Policy Decision making process?
- Is strategic culture “semi-permanent” or does it evolve overtime?
- Why hasn’t the study of strategic culture become main-stream in the management theory industry?
- How can strategic culture be utilized to improve outcomes?
- How can the study of cognitive psychology support improved policy outcomes?

At the conclusion of the analysis we will determine that the strategic decision making process and U.S. outcomes are impacted by strategic culture and cognition. In each U.S. policy decision analyzed, we will illustrate that the optimal outcome was not achieved. To help future leaders gain awareness we have developed an illustrative term for the combined impact of strategic culture and cognition on the decision making

process entitled the “drowning effect”. The drowning effect is the unintentional pushing of new concepts, approaches, acknowledgement of risk, and processes below the surface or casting them out to sea by national security professionals due to their cultural and cognitive biases. The paper concludes with a variety of practical recommendations strategic leaders can utilize to reduce the impact of the “drowning effect” and help improve future U.S. policy outcomes.

Core to the United States’ ability to provide for its people and support its allies around the world is its ability to maintain its national powers. National powers are the tools the United States uses to apply its sources of power; including human potential, economy, industry, science and technology, academic institutions, geography, and national will.³ According to Joint Publication 1, Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States, the four national powers used by the United States are Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic commonly referred to as the “DIME” by policy professionals.⁴ The United States has seen its relative economic power decline over the past two decades. We have gone from the world’s leading creditor to the world’s leading debtor nation⁵ (the U.S. currently borrows billions of dollars per day, in large part from foreign countries); and in addition, has its military (power) engaged in a seven year war with no near term end in sight. The U.S.’s military power has been over utilized and is stressed to the point it would be difficult to engage another near term competitor while maintaining its current operations⁶; according to a 2008 survey, conducted by Foreign Policy and New American Security, of more than more than 3,400 active and retired officers across all services between the rank of major and general.⁷ In addition, we now find ourselves in an increasingly vulnerable state in which both our economic and

military technology infrastructures are facing daily threats by cyber terrorists. Many economists blame the current economic outcomes on the U.S.'s strong dollar policies which have crippled the manufacturing industry and forced jobs and production offshore in increasing volumes, and our nation's leaders' devotion to a staggering trade deficit all in the name of securing allies and the advancement of U.S. multinationals.⁸ President Bush's policy decision to invade Iraq has been met with great criticism and has been cited as creating hatred of the west and generating increased support and making it easier for al Qaeda to operate throughout the Muslim world on their mission to destroy the United States and our ways of life.⁹

How does the world's greatest superpower find itself in such a situation? The United States government has access to the best minds in the world, how can such intelligent people create policy that will result in such seemingly obvious poor outcomes.¹⁰ Most national security professionals believe the decisions they make regarding the security of our nation should be made above any cultural, personal, and organizational self interest and should reflect an unbiased approach to selecting options which are in the best interest of the nation.¹¹ "However for a variety of reasons this is often not the case."¹² Scholars are now pointing to strategic culture and cognitive factors to explain contributing factors in the national security decision making process¹³.

The impact of cultural and cognitive forces on decision making can be termed the "Drowning Effect." I define the concept of the "drowning effect" as the unintentional pushing of new concepts, approaches, acknowledgement of risk, and processes below the surface or casting them out to sea by national security professional due to their bias as a result of cultural or cognitive impacts. Key to the drowning effect is the

unintentional nature of the action, meaning this can be overcome via training and practice. This paper is intended to provide the required awareness of the drowning effect and to provide practical recommendations strategic leaders at all levels of government can implement to eliminate the negative impact on decision making.

Decision Making

The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer – often; indeed, to the decider himself.....There will always be the dark and tangled stretches in the decision – making process – mysterious even to those who may be the most intimately involved¹⁴

Decision Making is defined as “deciding on important matters: the process of making choices or reaching conclusions.”¹⁵ There are a number of decision making models available to policy makers to help formulate U.S. Policy. While the various models may have varying steps they all should result in decisions that support the attainment of U.S. national interest. A number of studies have been conducted on how to enhance these models over the years based on outcomes of various policy decisions. There have also been a number of studies as to why policy makers who follow the various models still produce policies which result in poor outcomes. One such study was conducted on the Cuban missile crisis. In this study Essence of Decision, Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis the author compares and analyzes several models including the rational actor model which is an ideal model in which all information is processed in an unbiased manner and all potential courses of actions are given careful consideration before a final decision is made¹⁶. The other models (organizational behavior and governmental politics) address factors such as resistance, personal agendas, etc which influence the process and lead to poor outcomes.¹⁷ The Cuban Missile Crisis study provides the critical analysis required to support the notion of the

“Drowning Effect” in which we will look to strategic culture and cognition as two critical factors that directly influence the performance of policy makers and lead to poor outcomes.

Strategic Culture

Strategic Culture has long been used as a tool for understanding the actions of other countries.¹⁸ It developed from the 1930’s concept of national “ways of war” and was further studied and expanded in the 1970’s by Jack Snyder to explain the strategy of the Soviet Union after concluding that the Soviets did not behave according to rational choice theory.¹⁹ I will use the concept of strategic culture not as a tool to examine others but as a tool to identify how U.S. actions and motives are impacting the relative strength of our national powers in the changing environment of the 21st century.

What is strategic culture? There is limited agreement on its definition. “Scholars cannot agree on how to define strategic culture.”²⁰ The principle disagreement is between those who include behavior within their definition and those who exclude it.²¹ This scholarly tug of war over what to include in the definition has lead to a reluctance of many to acknowledge it as a tool in the decision making process. This long standing scholarly debate has added to the drowning effect as leaders fail to consider the potential for influence that strategic culture has on their decision making process. While there is scholarly debate the following definition encompasses the essence of the many that study and analyze the concept. Strategic culture is “the persistence of a distinctive strategic approach in the face of changes in circumstances that gave rise to it through processes of socialization and institutionalization and through the role of strategic concepts in legitimizing these social arrangements”²² A nation’s strategic culture flows from its geography and resources, history and experience, and society and political

structure.²³ It represents an approach that a given state has found success in the past. Although not immutable, it tends to evolve slowly.²⁴ “It is no coincidence, for example that Britain has historically favored sea power and indirect strategies or that it has eschewed the maintenance of a large army. Israel’s lack of geographic depth, its small but educated population, and technological skill have produced a strategic culture that emphasizes preemption, offensive operations, initiative, and increasingly advanced technology.”²⁵ These two examples help identify the powerful nature of strategic culture on a nation’s strategic leaders and how they are likely to respond to situations of national importance, potentially without fully examining the second and third order effects and the long terms impact to our national powers.

Should this definition cause concern? The definition suggests that strategic culture is rigid in nature; meaning it’s developed over a period of time and once established remains regardless of the conditions and environment in which the culture operates at times regardless of its continued effectiveness. There can be benefits from having a routine or systematic approach to decision making when speed is critical or when the situation is repetitive, but given the complexity and varying nature of most national security issues this is not the case. It is this persistent nature of strategic culture without consideration for environmental conditions and changes that we will examine as a potential cause for an eventual decline of US vital national powers. If we examine this definition in comparison to arguments from Plato and Aristotle, which focus on the internal ability of a society to renew itself according to modern formulations of this view, a society declines when bureaucratic stagnation, monopoly, caste, hierarchy, social rigidity, organizational obesity and arteriosclerosis make innovation

and adaptation difficult or impossible.²⁶ As societies age, these characteristics tend to become more predominant. Bernard Brodie expressed astonishment at how quickly British economic and military power declined as a result of poor policy decisions, Britain's decline after World War II provides a powerful near term example for U.S. leaders to study.²⁷ "Successful societies, in contrast, are those that find ways short of their own destruction to sustain the dynamism of their youth. The structure of such societies will presumably encourage completion, mobility, fluidity, pluralism and openness."²⁸ One final point regarding the definition and its relationship to the United States: The strategic culture is not the same as the national culture. While the two can share some similar traits and may be formed based on shared experiences, the strategic culture of a nation is that culture which resides in the hands of the national policy making elites.

What is the strategic culture of the U.S.? Like the scholarly debate regarding the definition there is also debate in attempting to define the appropriate primary responsible individual or organization of a nation's strategic culture. Is it the Office of the President, the Congress, the people, the military, or a combination of them all? We will look to those experiences and practices that focus on the primary elements of national power (diplomatic, economic and military) to help shape how we define U.S. national strategic culture versus an individual, group or portion of government. Both geography and history have shaped U.S. strategic culture. "Throughout most of America's history, North America's insular position and weak neighbors to the north and south combined to provide the United States free security. Shielded by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the Royal Navy, the United States grew to maturity in a benign

environment.”²⁹ “The fact that the United States did not have to exhaust itself by preparing for war and waging wars against its neighbors separated it from other countries, particularly the European great powers.”³⁰ As we begin to examine the historical events that shaped the U.S. culture to the twenty first century we see a distinctly different environment; one in which asymmetric warfare, cyber warfare and non-state actors reduce the geographic security and present a daily threat to our nation’s security. “American strategic culture was shaped by long periods of peace punctuated by generational conflicts – the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War I, World War II defined as crusades of good versus evil.”³¹ C. Vann Woodward wrote “Anxieties about security have kept the growth of optimisms within bounds among other peoples... the relative absence of such anxieties in the past has helped, along with other factors, to make optimism a national philosophy in America”³² Americans have also seen themselves as exceptional. This exceptionalism has influenced the way the United States deals with others as Walter Lippmann observed; American strategic culture does not recognize that America is one nation among many other nations with whom it must deal as rivals, as allies, as partners.

An analysis of the above yields a strategic culture that views war as a momentary break from normal life, not as a part of the daily struggle for freedom. Wars are waged in an attempt to destroy an evil in the world and as such cannot end without defeat of the foe so that the norm of life can be regained without the influence of evil. The idea that war is waged on our homeland is a foreign concept forged by the geography of our nation. Our great optimism encourages a set of policy makers that believe all things are possible. These cultural norms will guide how a leader makes policy decisions. If the

leader is not aware of the cultural biases it can lead to poor decisions. A key point to the study of cultures and their impact on decision making is that culture is not good or bad, right or wrong; rather, they are either aligned or misaligned with the organization's environment.³³

Cognition

"The goal of cognitive psychology is to understand the nature of human intelligence and how it works."³⁴ The study and debate of human cognition can be traced to the ancient Greeks. Their early debates turned into a century long debate between antagonists who believed all knowledge came from experience and the nativists who argued that children come into the world with innate knowledge.³⁵ There is still scholarly debate over the use and application of cognition, but from a practical application in terms of decision making it provides valuable insight into factors that influence how individuals make decisions. "Decisions are ultimately made in the minds of individual decision makers, even when working as members of a group charged with making a group decision or recommendation (i.e., a jury or committee), it is almost inevitable that those decisions will be influenced to some extent by such things as beliefs, biases, values, desires, experiences, and memories."³⁶ These influencers are called heuristics. John Anderson provides an excellent explanation of heuristics in his analogy between algorithms and heuristics. Algorithms are procedures (much like the various decision making models) guaranteed to result in a solution to a problem. Multiplication is an algorithm; if followed the procedure will result in the correct answer. "In contrast a heuristics is a rule of thumb that often (but not always) leads to a solution."³⁷ Heuristics are utilized because the human mind generally prefers and seeks simplicity, consistency, and stability and dislikes uncertainty and mental discomfort and

will routinely attempt to eliminate these aspects from decision making.³⁸ Another example supports our use of the term “Drowning Effect” to help illustrate the impact of unconscious elimination of new ideas and concepts on the decision making process. The brain’s desire for consistency and simplicity are key influencers on policy decision makers. Heuristics influence on the brain often prevent leaders from taking the time to fully comprehend the problems they are trying to solve; as a result, leaders will try to relate the current problem to ones they have resolved in the past. This allows leaders to not ask the tough questions, develop new analysis, and avoid the mental discomfort associated with learning another nation’s culture.³⁹ In my opinion, Robert McNamara’s accounts of his time as Secretary of Defense illustrate the potential negative impacts of making decisions without fully understanding the problem you’re attempting to solve. In the movie the “Fog of War” he suggests several lessons he learned that can help future leaders avoid his mistakes. He stressed the importance of “get the data” to help leaders better understand the problem; and asking tough questions before making a decision. To stress the point about asking tough questions he details his discussion with the former Vietnam foreign minister about how both countries never asked the intentions of each nation and how that question might have prevented the Vietnam War. The “Fog of War” and the lessons that McNamara recommend are similar to the Army’s new use of the concept of Design as a means of better understanding problems⁴⁰.

George Teague’s Cognitive Factors in National Security Decision Making provides several relevant examples of heuristics and their impact on past policy decisions:

Status Quo. The bias to maintain or perpetuate the way things have been done in the past; a strong desire by the decision makers to keep things the same. “Breaking from the status quo requires taking increased action and responsibility and opens the possibility of criticism and regret.” A good example is the current U.S. policy toward Cuba. Many would argue that our maintenance of the policy is based on status quo. The original security threat which initiated the policy has long been eliminated, the FBI has determined Cuba to no longer be a national security threat, the U.N. has condemned our maintenance of the policy for nearly 20 years, and American businessmen have lobbied for an end to the policy sighting how it harms the U.S. economy. Despite the overwhelming evidence and request for change several administrations both Democratic and Republican have taken the same stance and maintained the policy in varying degrees.

Sunk Cost. “Decision makers tend to make choices that justify past choices, even when they no longer seem valid. People are generally unwilling to admit to mistakes, especially when the cost for doing so is high.”⁴¹ The best example of this is General Westmorland and his continued push for a war of attrition as the method to fight the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). He was able to use sunk costs to influence Congress, the American public, and President Johnson’s policy decision to continue to send more troops despite the NVA’s continued will to fight resulting in more than 58,000 dead U.S. soldiers.⁴² Most modern U.S. Presidents have referred to sunk cost to also influence public support. A common message used is “we cannot let the deaths of our soldiers have been in vain” as a pretense for maintaining current funding and support.⁴³

Confirming Evidence. “Decision makers seek out information that supports their existing point of view while ignoring or dismissing contradictory information.”⁴⁴ This is usually associated with perception. “Perceptions (how individuals interpret and understand data presented to them) are amongst the most important influences in decision making.”⁴⁵ If we refer back to our discussion on U.S. strategic culture, our wars are fought as a means of destroying an evil in the world; hence the use of the phrase “axis of evil” by the Bush administration in the lead-up to the war on terror. This helped lead to a perception that Muslims were evil; surveys conducted by Cornell University support this statement: sixty-five percent of self-described highly religious people queried said, “they view Islam as encouraging violence more than other religions.”⁴⁶ Our perception is also influenced by what we see on the news and hear from our leaders.⁴⁷ This perception, supported by the heuristic confirming evidence lead to policy decisions that stretched the laws and beliefs of our democratic system. One example is the use of torture; history will be the best judge as to what extent heuristics played in the policy decision. Other heuristics that impact decision makers and U.S. Policy include: Values and Beliefs “they are forged over time and may reflect the cumulative values and beliefs of our parents, teachers, community, culture, etc.”⁴⁸ Other personal and group heuristics include Personality and Motivations, Emotions, Fatigue and Stress, and Group Think – when individuals take on the characteristic of the group dynamics and then behave in ways they would not as individuals.

Heuristics like strategic culture support the functional definition of the drowning effect. They are unintentional acts that result in the decision maker pushing certain concepts below the surface or casting them out to sea in an attempt to either maintain

the status quo, or support a belief. In either case they contribute to a less than optimal decision making process and potentially poor U.S. policy outcome.

Conclusion from Analysis

The results of our analysis indicate that strategic culture and cognition have had negative impacts on the decision making process. Our analysis of several varied U.S. policy decisions is that the impact of the “drowning effect” leads to poor policy decisions and an eventual decline of U.S. economic and military powers. Strategic leaders need awareness and training on the relationship amongst a nation’s strategic leaders understanding of culture and cognitive factors and its ability to maintain its national powers. Many have predicted the decline of the U.S. as a world power since its rise. Our nation is in a period of relative economic decline and our military power is currently being stretched thin. It is important for our leaders to acknowledge this and more important, to believe it if we are going to be able to stop the momentum of that decline. The decline is not due to geography, population, natural disaster or other common fate that has fell upon previous nations which faced their demise; but our inability to recognize our own strategic culture. I will refer to the ancient military theorist Sun Tzu and his axiom:

“Know thy self and know they enemy and win a hundred battles”⁴⁹ Strategic culture has long been used as a means of understanding and predicting the actions of other nations; a way to understand another country on it own terms for the way in which it employs history to better understand “the motivations, self-image, and behavior patterns of others. It’s time that U.S. national security professionals begin the study of strategic culture and cognitive factors as a means of understanding our own tendencies, biases, motivations as we navigate the remainder of the 21st century.

Recommendation

Core to the United State's ability to provide for its citizens, the defense of its homeland, and support of its allies is its ability to maintain its national powers. The ability of U.S. leaders to make policy decisions that foster positive outcomes are the best means of achieving this goal. The elimination of the "drowning effect" on the decision making process will lead to a utilization of the national security decision making process in which a full range of courses of actions are examined and decisions are not hampered by cultural bias and heuristics. This is possible if U.S. leaders are better informed and educated on the impact of the drowning effect.

Methods that will help eliminate the "drowning effect" include:

Improved Education/Awareness. Understanding is the first step to improve the situation. U.S. Strategic culture is rooted in exceptionalism. As such, it's not common for U.S. leaders to look inward as the source of decline. This paper points to the use of concepts such as strategic culture and cognition as a means to evaluate our own actions versus looking at the intentions and actions of others for the source of poor outcomes. Institutions that train our nation's leaders such as the service colleges should begin to expand the lessons on culture and cognitions impact on the decision making process. Development of models and practical exercises in outcome analysis based on decision bias would begin the awareness required to take this concept from the scholarly arena to a daily practicum.

Utilizing Environmental Scanning focused on the national powers as "a kind of radar to scan the world systematically and signal the new, the unexpected, the major and the minor".⁵⁰ Francis Aguilar (1967), in his study of the information gathering practices of managers, defined scanning as the systematic collection of external

information in order to (1) lessen the randomness of information flowing into the organization and (2) provide early warnings for managers of changing external conditions⁵¹. More specifically, Coates (1985) identified the following objectives of an environmental scanning system⁵²:

- detecting scientific, technical, economic, social, and political trends and events important to the institution,
- defining the potential threats, opportunities, or changes for the institution implied by those trends and events,
- promoting a future orientation in the thinking of management and staff, and
- alerting management and staff to trends that are converging, diverging, speeding up, slowing down, or interacting.

Improved environmental scanning at all levels of government will create situations where leaders have more time to develop policy and create an environment in which they will have the maximum time to think about their decisions. If decision makers are not rushed they are more likely to avoid the trappings of the drowning effect.

Creating Diversity. The traditional image of diversity is to have people of different races on your staff to bridge about different cultural ideas and beliefs. This is an important aspect of diversity, but to guard against the drowning effect diversity must ensure you have people with varying points of view. In David Rothkopf's Running the World he points out how diversity is more than just gender and race. He points to the impact Henry Kissinger had on U.S. policy via the influence he had on the beliefs, values, outlooks, and methods of those who worked for him during his tenure as national security advisor and secretary of state. "To illustrate the point, play the game two degrees of Henry Kissinger with all the national security advisors who followed him.

The objective is simple: identify those who worked for him as aides, on his staff, or directly with him.”⁵³ Every adviser since Kissinger is within two degrees (meaning that that each advisor either worked directly for Kissinger or they worked for someone that worked for Kissinger), further more you will find that every foreign policy decision since the cold war has been dominated by an individual within in two degree of Kissinger.⁵⁴ It’s important for leaders to recognize the makeup of their advisory teams and their capacity for diverse thinking; leaders need to monitor what percentage of the staff attended a certain type of college, what parts of the country dominate your staff, in addition to ethnic and gender mixture to ensure the unique ideas and approaches each individual brings to the table will be accepted.

Avoiding Status Quo. In Michael E. Raynor’s The Strategy Paradox states “the prerequisites of success today are often the antecedents of failure tomorrow” provides great insight to how leaders should think about maintaining the status quo beyond its usefulness or maintaining it without full consideration of the current environmental situation.⁵⁵ Once leaders are aware of the impact of Status Quo they can use the following techniques to lessen its pull⁵⁶:

- Never think of the status quo as your only alternative
- Ask yourself if you would consider the status quo as an option for the current situation if it were not the status quo
- Avoid exaggerating the effort or cost of switching the status quo

Understand the Problem. The Army War College has started adding the concept of design to the curriculum. Design is defined as a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe complex, ill-structured problems and develop approaches to solve them.⁵⁷ Its goal is to help leaders mentally refrain

from rushing to a solution until they are sure they understand the problem they are facing. Many poor policy decisions are made because leaders associate a new problem to a solution of an old problem without taking the time to ensure all of the variables are the same. As a result, there are potentially unintended consequences due to the failure of the leader to properly analyze the new situation. The concept of Design allows the leader to recognize that “today’s operating environment presents situations so complex that understanding them – let alone attempting to change them – is beyond the ability of a single individual.”⁵⁸ Design is structured to help leaders solve the right problem, and adapt to dynamic conditions.

Considering Influence of Sunk Cost. It’s natural to avoid admitting you made a mistake; it’s even more difficult for members of your team to admit they provided poor advice that lead to a policy decision which resulted in negative U.S. outcomes. As a result, sunk cost creates a real barrier to the decision making process. “For all decisions with a history you will need to make a conscious effort to set aside any sunk cost – whether psychological or economic – that will muddy your thinking about the choice and hand.”⁵⁹ John Hammond in The Hidden Traps of Decision making suggest the following:

- Seek out advice from people who were not involved in the previous policy decision. They are the most likely not to be influenced by previous decisions.
- Ask yourself why admitting to a previous mistake is distressing. Find ways to effectively deal with the issues so you can move forward and not continue to repeat the same policy decision mistakes.
- “Don’t create a failure-fearing culture that leads employees to perpetuate their mistakes.”⁶⁰ Reward people for the quality of the decision making analysis not only for the quality of the outcomes (consider the factors leading to the decision).

The ability of a leader to become proficient at avoiding the trappings of the drowning effect requires knowledge. Strategic Culture has been trapped in a scholarly debate over usage and terminology in that the concept has largely been ignored as a possible source of bias in the decision making process. Understanding your culture is important if leaders are to ensure it is aligned with the current national policy environment.

Cognitive psychologies, namely heuristics, are functions of the brain and as humans our decision making abilities are naturally influenced. However if we are willing to apply these techniques we can control the impact of heuristics and improve our ability to make decisions void of their negative influence. This approach will lead to improved decision making, U.S. outcomes, and a continued maintenance of U.S. economic and military powers.

Endnotes

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